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“OBEDIENCE AND NOT SACRIFICE”

AN EXPOSITION OF ISA. 1: 18-20

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Historical crises furnish the occasion for many of the great revelations in human society. Most of the inspiring truths which have been received by men have flashed across their minds in the white heat of some transforming experience. This principle applies to the truths of the Bible as well as to other literatures. Our interest is attracted to these words of Isaiah because they seem, as do so many of the utterances of this great man of God, to bear the marks of his wonderful experiences. The form of this utterance is significant. Leaving out of consideration for the moment the introductory formula, rendered in our versions, “come now let us reason together,” we turn our attention to the four conditional sentences. They all begin with the same conditional particle in the original and form an almost perfect stanza of four lines with a definite rhythmical movement. Our version renders the conditional particle twice by “though” and twice by “if,” and the slightly different thought in the two groups probably justifies this modification. But the form makes it almost necessary to conclude that the prophet, when he originally uttered these words, intended that they should convey four distinct conclusions, dependent each one of them upon the condition which is laid down. Thus interpreted we find in the first couplet the statement that no matter how serious may be their sins Jehovah will forgive them, and in the second couplet the statement that the people who are addressed have the choice open before them to render willing obedience and to secure the resultant prosperity, “if ye be willing and obey, ye shall eat the fruit of the land,” or to disobey and to be visited with the ultimate penalty, “if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall eat the sword,” with a change in the voice of the verb involving only a slight change in the vocalization of the original, which

seems to bring out in bolder contrast the original laconic utterance of the prophet.

But it is objected to this interpretation, that it would be impossible for Isaiah to offer such complete and thoroughgoing pardon for the sin of the people in this connection, or to use the words of one of the most recent English expositors of the book of Isaiah, "the language of promise and forgiveness is quite out of keeping with the stern logic of a legal plea." It is therefore proposed by many of the ablest of recent interpreters, following the lead of Wellhausen—who, in his *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, revived an earlier suggestion—to translate the apodoses in the first couplet of this paragraph as questions expecting a negative answer, "shall they become white as snow? shall they become as wool?" A modified form of this theory was introduced by Duhm, who translated affirmatively but regarded the words as ironical and hence in no sense declaratory or promissory. But with all due deference to the weight of authority in favor of this opinion, it does not seem to be tenable. Against it may be urged first of all the argument from the form of the statement already referred to. In this connection an interrogation without the sign of interrogation is contrary to all analogy and should be accepted only if there is no other satisfactory interpretation which can be given. Again "the stern logic of the legal plea" does not apply to the situation. The only reason for thinking of this passage as a legal plea at all is due to a misinterpretation of the words rendered "come now let us reason together, saith Jehovah." This translation does, it is true, seem to justify the view that this is a formal judicial proceeding. But this is not the necessary nor indeed the natural interpretation of these words. The root occurs in the original in the *Niphal*-stem which is found in only two other places in the Old Testament, and unfortunately in neither of these passages is its meaning perfectly clear. Cheyne rendered in his commentary on Isaiah, "Come now let us bring our dispute to an end," and, while he partially receded from this translation later, there is much to be said in its favor. A more exact paraphrase might be suggested in reading somewhat as follows, "Come now let us state the truth as to the basis of our mutual relations," or "Let us state the facts

of the case," and then Jehovah proceeds to set forth the promise of pardon and the conditions of deliverance.

But further, the hypothesis that these words are a formal judicial statement rests upon the supposition that this paragraph, vss. 18-20, is an independent section with no connection or only the loosest kind of connection with the preceding. This view, though widely accepted, does not commend itself. The introductory clause, as well as the alternative set before the people in vss. 19, 20, demands a close connection with something that has gone before. The "reasoning" is not some new thing, it is rather a plea or a demand that the right and proper conclusions be drawn from alternatives which have been previously outlined. In other words, it is imperative that we should look for the statement of what it is that is to be obeyed or disobeyed. Some argument must have preceded to which this paragraph brings the conclusion. In view of this fact, it seems unnecessary to look elsewhere for the statement of the conditions, when the preceding section, vss. 10-17, expresses them in the clearest and most explicit terms possible. We conclude therefore that the passage in vss. 10-20 is to be regarded as one continuous discourse and argument of which vss. 18-20 form the impassioned conclusion. The forgiveness which is promised in vs. 18 is not unmotivated, and so, impossible to the conception of the prophet. It is conditioned in the first place upon obedience, as is plainly stated in vss. 19, 20, and in the next place it is conditioned upon obedience to certain positive, distinctly stated requirements. It is demanded, therefore, if we would understand aright the teaching in vs. 18, that we examine carefully the argument of which it is the conclusion.

Now this argument or plea which is presented in vss. 11-17 falls into two parts, vs. 10 being the introductory formula or exordium. In vss. 11-15 the prophet describes with considerable wealth of detail the practice of the people, a practice evidently performed with a view to secure the favor and forgiveness which are so freely promised in vss. 18, 19. It seems best to make the division at the end rather than in the middle of vs. 15, which seems to be the favorite method of division at the present time. The chief argument in support of this division seems to be rhythmical rather

than logical, for the change of thought certainly comes first in vs. 16. But inasmuch as it is very generally admitted that the argument in vss. 11-15 can hardly be in its original form, for it is in all probability enlarged and overloaded as a result either of editorial activity or of the incorporation of marginal notes into the text, it is not wise to make the division against the demands of logic. Now the practice of the people is sacrificial and ritualistic. It is in the highest degree precise and elaborate. If practices of this kind could secure the favor of Jehovah then certainly the people to whom Isaiah was addressing himself would be justified in expecting that their zeal would result in averting the threatening danger and in securing for themselves the blessing and prosperity which they desired. But the prophet declares that their hopes are futile, their practices are useless and worse than useless, they are absolutely worthless for the purpose for which they intend them. Jehovah has no regard for the sacrifices and all the ritualistic services, nor does he attend to the prayers by which they accompany and explain the purpose of the sacrifice.

Instead of approaching him by the way of the ritual he demands that they come to him by the way of repentance and reformation, and this reformation is to manifest itself primarily in the social sphere. For it was in the social sphere in the broadest sense of the term that the sin of the people was most distinctly manifested—this whole exhortation is addressed to the rulers of Sodom, to the people of Gomorrah, vs. 10. In addition to the requirements which are stated in general terms, the specific demands are for the practice of justice in dealing with the helpless and dependent members of the community, the widow and the fatherless, and, in order to secure this end, it is specifically demanded that the oppressor, that is the man who uses his power and his position to deal unjustly with the weaker members of society, be restrained (reading with RV marg. “set right the oppressor” in vs. 17 instead of the less probable text “relieve the oppressed”). This is the alternative which is set before the people and which furnishes the basis for the statements in vss. 18-20. Obedience to these moral demands will bring from Jehovah the forgiveness and complete removal of their sins, while disobedience, which we may assume will manifest

itself primarily in refusal to heed these moral demands and in obstinate persistence in the sacrificial ritual, or in other words in the continuance in man-made methods of seeking the divine favor instead of following the divinely ordained plan, will inevitably result in complete destruction.

And now we must put the question as to whether it is possible to ascertain the situation which furnished the occasion for this significant teaching of Isaiah. It must be acknowledged at once that no definite answer can be given from the consideration of vss. 10-20 alone. But fortunately we are not left without a clue. The passage vss. 10-20 is connected very closely in its literary form with the preceding section, vss. 2-9, for the reference to Sodom and Gomorrah in vs. 9 must have occasioned the choice of the words, "ye rulers of Sodom, ye people of Gomorrah," in vs. 10. And it seems probable that the connection is more than literary. Therefore we propose to employ the description in vss. 2-9 to ascertain the circumstances under which the exhortation in vss. 10-20 arose. The description is most vivid. Judah and Jerusalem have persisted in their course of rebellion and disobedience until at last they have brought upon themselves the most terrific punishment, which has reduced them to the verge of annihilation. They have escaped this ultimate penalty for the present at least by the saving grace of Jehovah, who by leaving them a very small remnant has saved them from the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. The description is so realistic that one turns naturally and almost instinctively to the situation produced in Judah by the invasion of Sennacherib in 701 to find the occasion of this prophetic utterance. This dating of the prophecy has not won universal acceptance, but it must be admitted that with our present knowledge no other definite situation can be suggested in which this description would be applicable. But for our purpose it is not imperatively necessary that we should decide between 701 and some of the other occasions in which it is thought this oracle might have arisen. We are concerned only with the fact that on some occasion when Jerusalem was on the verge of complete destruction and when the final blow which they dreaded might still fall, the prophet addressed to them the words of warning and promise which are contained in vss.

10-20. The only argument of any consequence which can be urged against this connection of vss. 2-9 with 10-20 is based upon the hypothesis that the elaborate ritual and the careful and abundant sacrifice which the prophet condemns would hardly be characteristic of a situation such as that described in the foregoing section. For such practices as these, it is argued, there is need of a wealthy, prosperous, care-free people. In a time of distress sacrifice and ritual would be neglected. But this objection rests on an incorrect estimate of the power of the religious impulses in national life. It is not necessarily true that it is in times of prosperity and peace that the religious rites are observed with the most scrupulous care. These religious rites may be observed in the recklessness of despair, or more frequently they may be due to the desperate efforts of a people, who are on the point of being overthrown, by the very excess of their ritual to avert the wrath of the deity and to secure the remission of the penalty. This view may be supported by an abundance of evidence both psychological and historical. And it affords the most satisfactory interpretation of the conditions under which Isaiah enunciated the important truths with which this division of chap. 1 ends.

Retracing our steps, we maintain that in some time of great national peril, when the kingdom of Judah had barely escaped annihilation as the result of an overwhelming invasion which had swept up to the very walls of Jerusalem, so that the city herself was on the point of falling into the hands of the besieging army—though as yet she held out against the superior force that was pitted against her, her rescue being regarded as explicable only as the result of the grace of Jehovah—the prophet Isaiah sets forth certain fundamental principles of the divine government. The people were seeking to win the favor of the deity by an abundant ritual and were in a state bordering on frenzy in their excess of religious zeal. They were ready to go to almost any length in order to avert the wrath of Jehovah which they felt was resting upon them. A parallel to their state of mind and their activity may be seen perhaps in that dreadful act of the king of Moab who when hard pressed by the besieging armies of Judah and Israel “took his eldest son and offered him for a burnt offering upon the

wall" (II Kings 3:27). They seemed to feel that by the very multitude and value of their offerings they could change the attitude of Jehovah and save their threatened national life. And in the midst of this activity stands the prophet Isaiah, sympathizing with their desire as we may well believe, for all indications point to his firm belief in the deliverance of Jerusalem, but wholly opposed to their methods. And in this period of distress and perplexity, there flashes across the consciousness of the prophet (or in Biblical phrase, "the word of Jehovah came to him") the conviction that all these processes have no moral worth, they do not win the favor of Jehovah. Rather he is gracious and willing to forgive and restore his people if only they will obey him, and by the life of obedience and faith give expression to the fundamental purposes of his kingdom. And the simplest and most direct way to make this expression is by the observance of justice and righteousness in all their relations with one another and especially with those who by misfortune or bereavement are deprived of the ordinary and natural means of securing justice for themselves. Thus interpreted, this utterance of Isaiah comes to stand side by side with that great utterance of the prophet Habakkuk, arising out of similar if not the same circumstances, "the just, or the righteous, shall live by his faithfulness," that is, by his steady adherence to the divine plan and purpose for the government of the world and society.

The inferences which may be fairly drawn from this teaching of the prophet are worthy of a moment's consideration. The attitude toward the sacrificial system and indeed toward sacrifice in general is plain and unmistakable. Whatever worth may attach to it as the means of expressing the adoration and worship of the individual or the community, it has no worth as a means of winning the favor of the deity, and least of all can it secure forgiveness of sins. In this Isaiah is in full accord with the best teaching of all the Old Testament prophets. Amos declares that Jehovah wishes the people to give over their sacrifices and instead to practice justice and righteousness. Hosea says, "For I desire goodness and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God *more than* (or perhaps better, *and not*) burnt offerings." And even more positively Jeremiah a century later says: "For I spake not unto your fathers,

nor commanded them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices: but this thing I command them, saying, Hearken unto my voice, and I will be your God and ye shall be my people; and walk ye in all the way that I command you that it may be well with you." Always and everywhere the demand of Jehovah upon his people is for obedience and faith. This is not in any way to minimize or to ignore the fact of sin or its guilt. Sin is abhorrent to Jehovah and must be punished, but the punishment falls upon him who commits the sin in the first place. The people whom the prophet of the exile seeks to comfort are told that they have received "from Jehovah's hands double for all their sins." Sin may be removed only by an act of divine pardoning grace, the conditions being repentance, obedience, and faith. The people to whom Isaiah was addressing himself in the passage before us had been and were being punished sorely for their sins, but repentance and obedience would certainly be followed by forgiveness, for the mouth of Jehovah had spoken it. This principle applies in the prophetic teaching to the community rather than to the individual, but it is probably not too much to say that in so far as the prophets considered the individual in their thought, they would have maintained the applicability of the principle to the individual as well as to the community.

Second only in plainness to this teaching on the subject of sacrifice is the teaching that sins may be forgiven. Isaiah and his associates anticipated the noble words of the creed, for they believed "in the forgiveness of sins." Jehovah was a God of grace and mercy and he was always ready to forgive his people if they returned to him in repentance and obedient faith. It is true that Isaiah like many of his contemporaries did not have much hope that repentance and obedience would be forthcoming. The people were so set in their interpretation of the conditions governing the relations with Jehovah that they were not likely to accept the interpretation which the prophets gave, even though they set it forth as the direct teaching of Jehovah himself. But they all agreed that it might be possible to secure the forgiveness of sins if they would only seek Jehovah. Even Amos, the most relentless of them all, says more than once in the course of his prophecy,

"Seek Jehovah and live." "Hate the evil and love the good, and establish justice in the gate: it may be that Jehovah the God of Hosts will be gracious unto the remnant of Joseph."

It is scarcely necessary to add the further statement that the righteousness demanded by the prophets as the fruits of repentance was public righteousness; not primarily, if at all, did they think of the righteousness of the heart, which would find its manifestation only in the inner relations of the individual soul to his God. They were dealing with the community, and the necessary evidences of repentance in public life were in their judgment the practice of justice, righteousness, and mercy in the relations of man with man. And in this respect it was only natural that emphasis should be laid especially upon the manifestation of these qualities toward those members of the community who were not in a position to demand them or to inflict vengeance upon those who wronged them. Social righteousness was for them, then, the necessary and natural evidence of repentance and hence the indispensable condition for forgiveness and the continued manifestation of the divine favor.

Concluding note.—It has not seemed necessary or wise to burden the body of this paper with a multitude of references to opposing or supporting authorities. But it may not be amiss in this concluding note to indicate the judgment of a few of the leading authorities on the points at issue in the foregoing interpretation. A decided majority of modern interpreters agree in separating vss. 18–20 from the foregoing argument, or at the most allowing only a loose editorial connection. The names of Box, Cheyne, Dillmann-Kittel, Duhm, Glazebrook, Guthe, Hackmann, Kent (probably), Marti, and Whitehouse may be given. Of those who connect vss. 18–20 closely with the preceding as is done in this article may be mentioned W. E. Barnes, Mitchell, Skinner, George Adam Smith, and Staerk. The alignment is similar though not the same in the interpretation of vs. 18. Those who take the verse as either a question or ironical, following Michaelis and some earlier scholars, are Box, Duhm, Glazebrook, Guthe, Marti, Wellhausen, and Whitehouse. Hackmann's interesting suggestion differs from the foregoing but is like them in denying that there is any promise of forgiveness. The traditional declaratory interpretation is retained, though often for different reasons than those advanced in the foregoing article, by Burney, W. E. Barnes, Dillmann-Kittel, Kent, McFadyen (with some hesitation), Mitchell, Skinner (with some hesitation), G. A. Smith, and Staerk.